



The World of Wonder

What do you see when you look up at the sky at night, at the blazing stars against the midnight heavens? What do you see when the dawn breaks over the eastern horizon? What are your thoughts in the fading days of summer as the birds depart on their southward journey, or in the autumn when the leaves turn brown and are blown away? What are your thoughts when you look out over the ocean in the evening? What do you see?

Many earlier peoples saw in these natural phenomena a world beyond ephemeral appearance, an abiding world, a world imaged forth in the wonders of the sun and clouds by day and the stars and planets by night, a world that enfolded the human in some profound manner. This other world was guardian, teacher, healer—the source from which humans were born, nourished, protected, guided, and the destiny to which we returned.

Above all, this world provided the psychic power we humans needed in our moments of crisis. Together with the visible world and the cosmic world, the human world formed a meaningful threefold community of existence. This was most clearly expressed in Confucian thought, where the human was seen as part of a triad with Heaven and Earth. This cosmic world consisted of powers that were dealt with as persons in relationship with the human world. Rituals were established whereby humans could communicate with one another and with the earthly and cosmological powers. Together these formed a single integral community—a universe.

Humans positioned themselves at the center of this universe. Because humans have understood that the universe is centered everywhere, this personal centering could occur anywhere. For example, the native peoples of North America offered the sacred pipe to the powers of the four directions to establish themselves in a sacred space where they entered into a conscious presence with these powers. They would consult the powers for guidance in the hunt, strength in wartime, healing in time of illness, support in decision-making. We see this awareness of a relationship between the human and the powers of the universe expressed in other cultures as well. In India, China, Greece, Egypt, and Rome, pillars were established to delineate a sacred center, which provided a point of reference for human affairs and bound Heaven and Earth together.

There were other rituals whereby human communities validated themselves by seasonal acknowledgement of the various powers of giving ceremony, where the sun, the Earth, the winds, the waters, the trees, and the animals each in turn received expressions of personal gratitude for those gifts that made life possible. Clearly, these peoples see something different from what we see.

We have lost our connection to this other deeper reality of things. Consequently, we now find ourselves on a devastated continent where nothing is holy, nothing is sacred. We no longer have a world of inherent value, no world of wonder, no untouched, unspoiled, unused world. We have used everything. By “developing” the planet, we have been reducing Earth to a new type of barrenness. Scientists are telling us that we are in the midst of the sixth extinction period in Earth’s history. No such extinction of living forms has occurred since the extinction of the dinosaurs some sixty-five million years ago.

There is now a single issue before us: survival. Not merely physical survival, but survival in a world of fulfillment, survival in a living world, where the violets bloom in the springtime, where the stars shine down in all their mystery, survival in a world of meaning. All other issues dwindle in significance—whether in law, governance, religion, education, economics, medicine, science, or the arts. These are all in disarray because we told

ourselves: We know! We understand! We see! In reality what we see, as did our ancestors on this land, is a continent available for exploitation.

We followed the advice of the Enlightenment philosophers, who urged the control of nature: Francis Bacon (1561–1626), who saw human labor as the only way to give value to the land; René Descartes (1596–1650) and John Locke (1632–1704), who promoted the separation of the conscious self from the world of matter. In 1776, when we proclaimed our Declaration of Independence, we took the advice of Adam Smith's (1723–1790) *Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, a book of enormous influence in the world of economics from then until now. Our political independence provided an ideal context for economic dominance over the natural world.

As heirs to the biblical tradition, we believed that the planet belonged to us. We never understood that this continent had its own laws that needed to be obeyed and its own revelatory experience that needed to be understood. We have only recently considered the great community of life here. We still do not feel that we should obey the primordial laws governing this continent, that we should revere every living creature—from the lowliest insect to the great eagle in the sky. We fail to recognize our obligation to bow before the majesty of the mountains and rivers, the forests, the grasslands, the deserts, the coastlands.

The indigenous peoples of this continent tried to teach us the value of the land, but unfortunately we could not understand them, blinded as we were by our dream of manifest destiny. Instead we were scandalized, because they insisted on living simply rather than working industriously. We desired to teach them our ways, never thinking that they could teach us theirs. Although we constantly depended on the peoples living here to guide us in establishing our settlements, we never saw ourselves as entering into a sacred land, a sacred space. We never experienced this land as they did—as a living presence not primarily to be used but to be revered and communed with.

René Descartes taught us that there was no living principle in the singing of the wood thrush or the loping gait of the wolf or the mother bear cuddling her young. There was no living principle in the peregrine falcon as it soared through the vast spaces of the heavens. There was nothing to be communed with, nothing to be revered. The honeybee was only a mechanism that gathered nectar in the flower and transformed it into honey for the sustenance of the hive, and the maple tree only a means for delivering sap. In the words of a renowned scientist: "For all our imagination, fecundity, and power, we are no more than communities of bacteria, modular manifestations of the nucleated cell."

In order to counter reductionistic and mechanistic views of the universe such as this,

we need to recover our vision, our ability to see. In the opening paragraph of *The Human Phenomenon*, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955) tells us: “One could say that the whole of life lies in seeing. That is probably why the history of the living world can be reduced to the elaboration of ever more perfect eyes.... See or perish. This is the situation imposed on every element of the universe by the mysterious gift of existence.”

Concerning this future we might make two observations. First, the planet Earth is a onetime project. There is no real second chance. Much can be healed because the planet has extensive, albeit limited, powers of recovery. The North American continent will never again be what it once was. The manner in which we have devastated the continent has never before occurred. In prior extinctions, the land itself remained capable of transformations, but these are now much more difficult to effect. Second, we have so intruded ourselves and debilitated the continent in its primordial powers that it can no longer proceed simply on its own. We must be involved in the future of the continent in some comprehensive manner.

It is clear that there will be little development of life here in the future if we do not protect and foster the living forms of this continent. To do this, a change must occur deep in our souls.

The universe is the supreme manifestation of the sacred. This notion is fundamental to establishing a cosmos, an intelligible manner of understanding the universe or even any part of the universe. That is why the story of the origin of things was experienced as a supremely nourishing principle, as a primordial maternal principle, or as the Great Mother, in the earliest phases of human consciousness.

We must remember that it is not only the human world that is held securely in this sacred enfoldment but the entire planet. We need this security, this presence throughout our lives. The sacred is that which evokes the depths of wonder. We may know some things, but really we know only the shadow of things. We go to the sea at night and stand along the shore. We listen to the urgent roll of the waves reaching ever higher until they reach their limits and can go no farther, then return to an inward peace until the moon calls again for their presence on these shores. So it is with a fulfilling vision that we may attain—for a brief moment. Then it is gone, only to return again in the deepening awareness of a presence that holds all things together.

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